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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUANGZHOU 000412

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/11/2033

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SUBJECT: Bishop of Guangzhou - Walking a Tightrope between Beijing and Rome

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(U) Classified by Consul General Robert Goldberg for Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Bishop of Guangzhou is clearly someone to watch - politically savvy, a man of immense faith and considerable charm, a connoisseur of fine wines (not just those used in the mass) and someone capable of both walking a tightrope between Rome and Beijing as well as finding ways to get his message without a backlash from the very conservative political and religious establishment in south China. Of some note were his views on Tibet, which were somewhat surprisingly, pretty much in line with those of the government in Beijing. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Joseph Gan (Gan Jinqui), the 44-year-old Bishop of Guangzhou, oversees a diocese of some 260,000 Catholics. How does he have such a precise handle on the number of believers? Simple. His local priests take attendance, go out and minister to their parishioners and count heads - while the local religious authorities simply estimate and come up with a total that is 30,000 fewer. The politically savvy Gan, who was appointed Bishop in October 2006 and ordained in December 2007, well understands just how deftly he has to navigate the distance between Rome and Beijing, but even more how "indirect" he has to be in making the case for the church here with the very conservative south China political and religious establishment. The latter would just as soon he spend most of his time in devotional moments in his church (which is undergoing, in his view interminable repairs) rather than seek permission to go outside the city and visit parishioners in the rest of the diocese. For his part, Gan would just as soon not have to spend any time with the establishment at all since most evening soirees and get-togethers with them amount to massive drinking bouts (theirs) and lots of head nodding (his). Gan has so far resisted the blandishments of senior Guangdong leaders like Party Secretary Wang Yang and Provincial Governor Huang Huahua for meetings. Simply put, he doesn't think they have much to "offer" him.

¶3. (C) Over dinner with the French, Polish and American Consuls General on July 10, Gan, who will soon start an advanced course in religious studies at Renmin University in Beijing, provided his views on a variety of issues. First, he sees little hope for reconciliation between the Vatican and Beijing, despite all of the talk in the press. The key issue, in his view, is not so much the ordination of priests; his own was finessed through an opaque process wherein one side or the other proposes and the other counter-proposes, often the same name. The larger issue is religious freedom. At this point, the Chinese government is not willing to widen the bounds for freer expression of one's religious beliefs. Small steps in this direction are welcome, but there is no way, in Gan's view, that Rome can tolerate the narrow confines in which religious work is currently undertaken.

¶4. (C) The more interesting and revealing discussion with Gan centered on Tibet, where he is more or less completely behind the efforts of the Beijing government, dating back to the time of Mao

Zedong, to reduce the authority of the lamas and the "slavery" to which so many Tibetans have been condemned in the service of the lamas. When asked about an "outside" authority (Beijing) imposing its will on a traditional religious society and the inevitable backlash that would come from both Tibetan priest and Buddhist believer, Gan dismissed any suggestion that somehow there was any similarity to how Beijing deals with believers in general or seeks to wield authority over religious organizations which might pose as counter power centers. He also dismissed the Dalai Lama's claims that he was only a religious leader, interested in the welfare of his followers. Religious leaders don't go before Parliaments in Britain or Congress in the United States and deliver deeply political statements, as the Dalai Lama has done, in Gan's view.

15. (C) The conversation eventually turned to the issue of values and here Gan - optimistic about the long term but realistic about the near term - said that it would take several generations for the Chinese to learn that what holds society together is more than taking care of your families, that it is also love of your neighbor, charity and justice. In that regard, the response of so many young people to the Sichuan earthquake was promising, but it needed the kind of follow-through that relies on non-government organizations and what one could only see as the equivalent of faith-based initiatives. In Gan's view, thousands of years of history that emphasize the small communities in which Chinese have traditionally lived can't be replaced in thirty years of reform and opening with the greater consciousness needed for communities of the spirit, a term he used several times in the course of the evening.

16. (C) Note: At the end of the evening, Bishop Gan told the CG that he hoped to see him again soon, but perhaps an invitation to dinner should best be proffered through the French CG. The Chinese are less concerned about him, he noted. He also said that he had hoped to travel to the U.S. four-five years ago, but had been not permitted to go, even though he has traveled to France, Belgium and Hong Kong in

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the past. He indicated he would welcome participating in a U.S. International Visitor program, though that might best be organized with other religious leaders as he doubted that the government would allow him to go on his own. The Bishop, a 1991 graduate of Zhongnan Seminary in Wuhan, also told the CG, that when his parishioners do talk about the United States, it's often to ask why America is always so critical of things China does and does not give China - its people as well as its government - the kind of praise it deserves for advances in the post Mao period.

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